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Spiritual Potential of the Communal Revival: Yiddish Culture and Post-Soviet Jewry

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Even though Yiddish as a spoken language will most likely disappear in the former Soviet Union, it will still be needed as a symbol of Jewish identity – one that is not overtly Zionist or religious. Yiddish, with its rich culture and literature, can be utilized to help Jews reconnect with their roots. In Israel, older immigrants, whose knowledge of Yiddish is not fluent, and who are unable to master Hebrew, employ Yiddish in order to communicate. Zionist Yiddishism has become one of the ideological components in the identity of immigrants from the former USSR, and enables them to link up with some form of Jewish culture as they integrate into the life of Israel.

Modern Russian Jewish culture, which reached its striking achievements in all domains at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, had a tri-lingual character: Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. The Bolshevik Revolution and the cultural changes that followed it brought an end to this traditional model. For ideological reasons beyond the scope of this discussion, the tri-lingual model of Jewish culture was replaced by a uni-lingual model, whose sole component was Yiddish. Toward the end of the Soviet Union, this Yiddishist Soviet-Jewish model was much weakened, for two reasons: the lingual assimilation that caused a drastic diminishing in the percentage of Yiddish speakers (and mostly Yiddish readers) among Soviet Jews; and the renewed penetration of the Hebrew language into the national consciousness of Soviet Jewry, due to the revival of the Zionist movement and the return to religion. Russian and Hebrew had no acknowledged legalistic hold as cultural languages of Soviet Jewry. However, during the last decades of Soviet rule, Yiddish became a barrier for young Jews who wished to draw closer to the culture of their people. There were no institutionalized ways to learn Yiddish (especially in its literary form), and Yiddish gradually became the realm of the older generations, which had undergone their socialization under entirely different circumstances.

The main working language of informal Jewish bodies that arose during the last years of the Soviet Union was Russian, and the symbolic language of the Zionist bodies was Hebrew. Under existing circumstances, Yiddish was considered the language of the old, and more so – the language of the Yiddishist-Soviet anti-Zionist establishment.

The post-Soviet era caused this actual linguistic state to gain legitimacy. All three languages of the old Russian-Jewish linguistic triangle resumed their place openly side by side, with Russian mostly serving as the main working language of the new Jewish bodies, and Yiddish and Hebrew competing for the status of the Jewish national language on the symbolic level.

The aim of this article is to present the state of Yiddish culture in the post-Soviet area and its place in shaping renewed Jewish identity in the former USSR. The author used written sources as well as his own personal recollections, having been one of the Yiddishist activists before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and took part in many organizations, events and cultural initiatives related to the Yiddish language, on both the formal-legalist and informal levels.

The Yiddish language occupied a unique place in the history of the Jews throughout the existence of the Soviet Union. According to the *Yevseksia*, Yiddish, "the language of the Jewish masses," supposedly served all national Soviet-Jewish cultural expressions, as far as the government allowed such expressions. The years in which cultural activity in Yiddish was strictly forbidden, after the total destruction of Jewish cultural institutions in 1948-1949, were very few. Its renewal process started gradually as of 1956.¹ From then until *perestroika*, authorized Jewish culture in the Soviet Union developed along the old course, although on a much more limited scale than before the destruction of 1948. The periodical *Sovietish Heimland*, which began appearing in Moscow in 1961, first as a bi-monthly and later as a monthly, was the main organ of this culture.² It was headed, from its beginning to its very end (even after its name was changed to *Die Yidische Gas* after the disintegration of the Soviet Union), by the poet Aaron Vergelis, who was one of the few Jewish cultural activists in the Soviet Union not imprisoned during the anti-Semitic persecutions at the end of the 1940s. Vergelis gradually succeeded in amassing broad authority in Jewish culture in the whole Soviet Union. He served as censor for books published in Yiddish; decided upon the inclusion of books in the publication plan of the publishing house *Sovietski Pisatel*; and gave auspices to the Jewish theater. He was actually the senior advisor of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on all matters relating to Jews.³

Vergelis also managed to have authority regarding the activity of the newspaper, *Birobidjaner Shtern*, in faraway Birobidjan, until an open conflict arose between him and the new editor, the young and active, Leonid Shkolnik.⁴ In spite of the apparent inferiority of Birobidjan compared to Moscow in everything to do with Yiddish creative powers, as well as

in prestige and the ability to influence decisions of the central authorities, Leonid Shkolnik succeeded in his effort to detach his paper from the traditional dependence upon Vergelis and the *Sovietish Heimland* by relying on his own connections with key people in the government of Birobidjan, and by utilizing the apparent easing in the attitude of the local government toward Jewish culture and its ambition to decrease its dependence on the central government.

The *Birobidjaner Shtern*, under the leadership of Shkolnik, became an alternative platform for Soviet Yiddish authors who would not or could not publish their work in the *Sovietish Heimland*. Until then, the only shelter for Yiddish writers of this kind who dared revolt against the rule of Aaron Vergelis without risking a conflict with the Soviet government, was the Warsaw weekly, *Folks-sztyme*, the organ of the Polish Jewish organization that had some circulation in the Soviet Union, mostly in Lithuania, Latvia and western Ukraine. The *Birobidjaner Shtern* published Yiddish translations of the works of Grigory Kanovich,⁵ a Lithuanian Jewish author who wrote on Jewish topics and was immensely popular. In spite of his affinity to Yiddish culture and his full mastery of literary Yiddish (he attended a Yiddish primary school), his works were never published in the *Sovietish Heimland*, contrary to the works of other Russian-Jewish writers such as Anatoly Ribakov, who dealt only rarely with Jewish topics. The reason for this was Grigory Kanovich's manifested nationalism. In an interview to the *Birobidjaner Shtern*, he stated: "It matters not what my fate may be, it does not exist by itself, outside the fate of the Jewish people."⁶ Both Kanovich's personality and the special circumstances in Lithuania relating to Jewish nationality⁷ turned him into a cultural symbol for a whole generation of Soviet Russian Jews. His choice of Russian, and not Yiddish, as the language of his creativity was primarily explained by his wish to communicate with the Jewish masses in Russia in their own tongue.

Such an independent nationalistic attitude was not acceptable to Vergelis. He did not allow the publication in his periodical of any criticism or even mention of Grigori Kanovich's works. Positive criticism about Kanovich by Moyshe Belenky of Moscow and Berl Royzen of Czernovitz were published in the *Folks-sztyme* of Warsaw,⁸ and this author published a criticism of one of Kanovich's books in the *Birobidjaner Shtern*.⁹ In that article, the author presented a position regarding the existence of Russian-language Jewish literature in the new age: "We can't ignore the fact that today, the Jewish folk in the Soviet Union speaks and reads mostly Russian. Does this mean that Yiddish literature no longer has any value? Not at all. However, we must recognize that Jewish literature in Russian is today as natural a phenomenon as was Jewish literature in Yiddish during the last century."¹⁰

This critical article immediately attracted the attention of Yiddishists in the West, mainly because of the presentation of this painful linguistic-identity problem and also because of the young age of the writer.¹¹ The renowned expert on Yiddish literature Prof. Chone Shmeruk wondered in 1988: "Was Chernin forced to publish his words in the *Birobidjaner Shtern* because they do not agree with his opinions in the *Sovietish Heimland*, or because they object to the author Kanovich? Is the objection of the *Sovietish Heimland* to Jewish culture in Russian, or to some expressions of it, valid? Will the *Sovietish Heimland* have the right to maintain the seniority or the hegemony over Yiddish in the Jewish cultural setting in the Soviet Union? We have no clear answers to these questions. And the possible answers have no essential importance in view of the very clear phenomenon outlined in the cultural-linguistic reality of Soviet Russian Jewry."¹² Shmeruk presented correct answers. However, what was unknown to the Israeli researcher was evident to the author, who claims with certainty that Vergelis's main objection to the article had to do with Kanovich's personality, although the view that it is possible to maintain Jewish national literature through the Russian language even under conditions of assimilation was also unacceptable to him.

Aaron Vergelis obstinately tried to resist Leonid Shkolnik's revolt, and this was expressed in various ways. He wrote denouncing letters to the authorities,¹³ this time to no avail. This failure by Vergelis was one of the first signs of the weakening of the totalitarian Soviet rule in regard to legal Jewish activities.

Toward the mid-1980s, due to the far-reaching changes in Soviet Union's society, defined as *perestroika* and which ultimately brought about the end of the Soviet era, Yiddish functioned in the following areas:

1. As a disappearing oral language.
2. As the language of literature and journalism: the monthly *Sovietish Heimland* and the daily (five days a week) *Birobidjaner Shtern*, circulated also outside the autonomous Jewish district in Birobidjan; as well as books published by the Moscow publisher *Sovietski Pisatel*. In addition, there were regular Yiddish broadcasts on the local Birobidjan radio. The Soviet propaganda station "Shalom and Kidma," directed at foreign listeners, stopped its Yiddish broadcasts during these years mainly because of lack of demand, but continued to broadcast in Hebrew.
3. As the language of theater: Jewish theater troupes, both professional and amateur, were active in Moscow, Birobidjan, Vilna and Kovno. The two professional troupes, Der Yiddisher Musikaler Kamer-Teater and Der Moskover Yiddisher Dramatischer Ensemble – later under the name The Jewish Theater Shalom – appeared throughout the Soviet Union.

During the second half of the 1980s, theater troupes were also formed in Kiev. In 1948, the Estrada troupe, Freilechs, was formed in Kiev, formally tied with Birobidjan. It was headed by the composer, Michael Shparber, and a popular bard-poet in Ukraine, Dmitry Kimelfeld (who composed, among other things, songs for the TV show "Tevia der Milchiker" according to Sholom Aleichem, starring Michail Ulianov). In 1989, the Freilichs troupe put on a musical show, "A Yid fun Ganz Yohr" (A Simple Jew), written by Dmitry Kimelfeld and Velvl Chernin. Its plot was based on the annual cycle of religious and secular Jewish holidays. In 1990, the play "An Exodus fun Yehupetz" (Exit from Yehupetz) by Dmitry Kimelfeld (mostly in Russian), was performed. It spoke openly of *aliyah* and emigration from the Soviet Union. Most of the actors left the country after this show, some (among them Kimelfeld) going to Israel, while others (among them Shparber) left for the West.

After the Freilechs troupe, which actually belonged to Birobidjan, there were also local formal troupes. In 1987, an amateur troupe was formed called Nigunim, and led by a Yiddishist with Zionist leanings (he was also a Hebrew teacher) named Grigori Feller. In 1988, a professional troupe was formed, although not on a high level, called Mazel Tov, led by the actor and director Grigori Melski, who had formerly been with Freilechs. He did not know Yiddish well. Both troupes held Yiddish courses, mostly for the actors. In 1988, Mazel Tov performed the play "Shver zu Zein a Yid" (It's Hard to be a Jew) by Sholom Aleichem. The director was an Israeli-Arab, Munir Bachri, brother of the Israeli-Arab actor Muhamed Bachri, and the literary advisor was Velvl Chernin.

In 1988, the theater troupe Ufkum (Rebirth) was formed in Riga, headed by Carmela Skorik. A Yiddish troupe was also

formed in Belz, Moldova, headed by the young Yiddish author Michael Felzenbaum.¹⁴ Several theater and one-man shows (mostly of singers) were presented at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s in various cities, often with the support of local associations for Jewish culture. Their repertoire was partly or wholly in Yiddish. Most of these artistic bodies disappeared rather quickly, due to the emigration of their hard-core members to Israel or Western countries, but some continue their work to the present time. The great (if short-lived) success of these troupes and actors who performed in Yiddish at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, some proving the economic viability of Jewish theater, may be explained by the awakening of national awareness among Soviet Jews, who wished to become consumers of their own culture, and Yiddish was, without a doubt, one of the firmly rooted ingredients of national identity of Soviet Jews, more so than Hebrew. They had no far-reaching demands from the artistic performance, because those who could still understand (even partly) an oral text in Yiddish far outnumbered those who could read literary Yiddish. However, Hebrew texts (mostly songs) appeared even then, mostly in singing concerts. The Hebrew texts were a small minority compared to those in Yiddish, but their presence resulted from a demand by part of the Jewish public, and represented the beginning of the struggle between Zionist Hebrew and diaspora Yiddish, about their relative place in forming the new national identity of the Jews in the post-Soviet era.

At the same time, because of the growing linguistic assimilation over the years, the Russian language is infiltrating the Jewish stage more and more, leaving both Yiddish and Hebrew in the background. The Jewish theater groups in Lithuania, Moldavia and Birobidjan remained the most staunch defenders of Yiddish and objectors to the infiltration of the Russian language onto the Jewish stage (this refers to amateur troupes of Birobidjan itself and not the professional groups only formally belonging to Birobidjan, such as the musical chamber theater in Moscow and the Freilechs troupe in Kiev.) This trend was already evident in the mid-1980s.¹⁵

Toward the end of the Soviet era, Yiddish was already not the teaching language in the schools and was not even taught as a foreign language (unlike Hebrew, which had been taught clandestinely for years using textbooks sent from Israel). Although a publisher in Kabarovsk published a lavish textbook entitled *Alefbeis*,¹⁶ prepared "according to the decision of the Educational Methods Council of the Jewish autonomous region,"¹⁷ this book was actually meant primarily for propaganda purposes. Another important publication should be mentioned, and that is the large (40,000 word) Russian-Yiddish dictionary published in 1984 by the prestigious Moscow publishers, Russki Yazik.¹⁸ It is significant that a dictionary was published for translating from Russian to Yiddish and not vice versa, in a reality in which most Yiddish speakers in the Soviet Union (a minority among the Jews there) were well versed in Russian, which had become the mother tongue of most Soviet Jews.

We must note that the last time a Yiddish-Russian dictionary had been published was in 1940 in Minsk, already a rare occurrence.¹⁹ The explanation for this was that the manuscript for the Russian-Yiddish dictionary had already been prepared at the end of the 1930s, by a group of Jewish linguists of the "Institute for Proletarian Jewish Culture" in the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. This institute was closed on the eve of World War II, its employees were arrested and the manuscript confiscated. At the beginning of the 1980s, within the limited concessions to Jewish culture approved by the government, the manuscript was removed from the KGB cellars and given to Aaron Vergelis. The final editing and preparation for publication was carried out by Moini (Moisey) Shulman.

The detailed linguistic review "About the Yiddish Language" was included in this dictionary, written by the renowned Yiddish linguist Eli Falkovich and published almost twenty years previously in the encyclopedia, *Languages of the Peoples of the Soviet Union*.²⁰ The concessions referred to in the 1980s did not include permission to speak openly about anti-Jewish persecutions during the Stalin era. Therefore, the preface only mentioned that "the first version of the manuscript was prepared in 1949; but the death of the editor, the renowned linguist and member of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine Eli Spivak, delayed completion of the work for a long time."²¹

One of the most impressive achievements of Yiddish culture approved by the Soviet authorities in the 1980s was related to the project of the group, Yiddish, that worked between 1981-1983 within the framework of the Maxim Gorki Literary Institute in Moscow. Two of the five students working in the group were born after the Holocaust. Gennady Estraiikh, in his article "Young Yiddish Writers at the Decline of the Soviet Union: Myth and Reality," correctly states that "the Yiddish group at the prestigious Institute naturally assumed a major role in the propaganda writings of *Sovietish Heimland*."²²

The appearance in July 1986 of "The Youth Issue" was directly connected to this project. Aaron Vergelis hurried to present this issue on its front page as having propaganda value, pointing to the supremacy of the Soviet Union in preserving Yiddish culture.²³ This claim met with the guarded approval of Yiddishist circles in the West,²⁴ as well as of the leftwing Zionist Yiddishists in Israel.²⁵ Such issues appeared also in 1987, 1988 and 1989, printing works of different genres by young authors. Some of them wrote originally in Yiddish; others wrote in Russian and were translated (without mentioning this fact). Although fiction and poetry were actually written in Yiddish, articles of a popular-scientific nature were usually (though not always) written in Russian. The authors of the last type were mostly associated with the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society²⁶ (among them Igor Krupnik, Mark Kupowetsky, Michael Krutikov, and Shlomo Koliakov). The emergence of a whole group of young Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union not only became a playing card in the hands of Soviet propaganda, but also a significant fact for Yiddish literature as a whole, both in the Soviet Union and abroad.

In order to understand why the Soviet authorities allowed this phenomenon and what propaganda value they hoped to gain by it (undoubtedly at the advice of Aaron Vergelis), we have to consider the general state of the Yiddish language and literature after the Holocaust.

The period after the Holocaust was characterized for the Yiddish language by several essential social-demographic elements that were not typical of its history in earlier times. The most significant were:

1. A marked decline in the number of natural Yiddish speakers.
2. The disappearance of the traditional massive concentration of Yiddish speakers in Eastern Europe.
3. The destruction of the educational system based on Yiddish as a teaching language.
4. A rapid transition of the new generations from Yiddish-speaking families to other languages (or to Hebrew in Israel).
5. Yiddish turning into a language of the elderly (apart from some of the Haredi public in Israel and the West), and the limitation of its use from a

language serving all areas of life to a language spoken by the elderly alone, or the "secret language" of this generation.

6. The status of Yiddish as a disappearing language and, in parallel, the rise of interest in Yiddish and its literature as an academic subject.
7. Israel gradually becomes the center of the surviving Yiddish literature.

Under these circumstances, the lack of new literary forces became an open and sad secret among lovers of Yiddish literature. This caused the almost ecstatic reception of any literary effort of a young person by the very fact that he/she writes in Yiddish.

In fact, new names of writers have started to appear in Yiddish literature. There may be over 60 authors born after the Holocaust writing in Yiddish today.²⁷ Half of them have taken the first steps in writing in Yiddish in the Soviet Union. This group of writers is characterized by some socio-cultural innovations as compared to older Yiddish writers, but the most striking difference between the two groups lies in the fact that their choice of Yiddish as a writing language was not self-understood. All of them, without exception, were schooled in other languages (i.e., in the Soviet Union, in Russian). They had to invest much effort in order to raise their mastery of literary Yiddish to the level of creating in it. Their choice of Yiddish as a creative language under these circumstances was a declarative act of ideological identification.

Today masses of Yiddish speakers do not exist, and those remaining are not concentrated in defined areas. After the Holocaust, Yiddish literature has become more of a literature of immigrants, as it does not have a cultural and linguistic metropolis.

The new literary activity in Yiddish may be compared with the movements for developing the languages of several European peoples, such as the Czechs, Lithuanians, Finns, Estonians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Slovaks, Catalans and others. What unites all of these peoples is the fact that their language served at the beginning of the nineteenth century as the languages of the "common people," while the languages of culture and literature were those of other peoples, who ruled them politically and culturally: German for the Czechs, Estonians, and Latvians; Russian and Polish for the Ukrainians; Polish for the Lithuanians; Swedish for the Finns; Hungarian for the Slovaks; Spanish and French for the Catalans. The cultural activists of these European languages tried and even succeeded to raise the "common language" to the level of a cultural and literary language that could be used as a national language in every aspect and in all areas, and could drive out the foreign language. This is what Y.L. Peretz meant when he wrote to Sholom Aleichem that he wanted to turn Yiddish ("Zhargon") into a "full blown language." This opinion was expressed by Peretz, in his known discussion with Sholom Aleichem.

Just as the efforts in the other languages succeeded to some extent to make them into national cultural languages, so did the efforts succeed to make Yiddish a rich and developed literary language able to serve in all walks of life. But contrary to the other European languages, parallel to the process of making the "language of the masses" into a literary one, the foreign language (or actually languages) took control of the "masses" themselves.

The older people who use Yiddish as a literary language were born and educated before the Holocaust and before the foreign language had taken firm control. Those born after the Holocaust who chose to write in Yiddish, did so knowing that the masses were not with them and that circumstances did not leave room for hope of turning the clock back. Most Yiddish-speakers today are older; moreover, they do not use it as a literary language. They often cannot read or write in Yiddish, are not affected by the literary language, and use it only for speaking in the various dialects and often with a strong linguistic interpretation (i.e. using a mixture of Yiddish and another language). Some of them are only partly able to understand the literary language, for both lexical and phonetic reasons.

In this respect, the state of modern Yiddish literature is similar to that of other literatures in disappearing European languages: Irish, Parisian, Provençal, Breton, Basque, Belorussian and the like. Most of the speakers of these languages also use them for speaking only in dialect forms and often with linguistic interpretation, and are very distinct from those making the effort to maintain the literary form (mostly intellectuals with a nationalistic ideology). It is obviously quite difficult to bridge the gap between everyday needs and the linguistic-cultural ideology, even when the disappearing national language has an official status next to the dominant foreign language (Ireland, Belorussia, the Basque autonomy).

Since the motives of the writers born after the Holocaust to create in Yiddish are independent of everyday needs, we may assume that this work will not disappear along with the disappearance of Yiddish from daily life through the passing away of the older generation. Likewise, we may see efforts to develop new literature in such languages as Cornish and Manx Gaelic, although there is no longer anyone who may claim them as actual mother tongues.

Yet there is an essential difference between literary activity in the above-mentioned European languages and modern Yiddish literature. The former are connected to ethnic-national movements in countries or districts with a homogeneous population and a distinct identity. It does not matter that today most Belorussians speak Russian, most Irish – English, most Basques – Spanish, most Bretons – French, and in Cornwall and the Isle of Man there are no natural speakers of the local languages; the cultural heritage and the literary works in these languages serve as important symbols of the ethnic-national identity of the inhabitants. This is not relevant for Yiddish, except for the autonomous region of Birobidjan, which still exists within the Russian Federation. Yet Birobidjan was never an actual center for the national-cultural aspirations of the Jewish people, nor was it an important center of Yiddish literary creation.²⁸

Jewish statehood was renewed in the State of Israel after the Holocaust, but Yiddish lost the struggle for the position of "the language" (*die shprach*), or even of "a language" – one of the national languages of the Jewish national state. The repercussions of this fact on the diaspora are clear and evident. Today, Hebrew symbolizes not only the Jewish religion but the renewed Jewish statehood, enables people to be absorbed in the country, and is in demand as the national language taught in educational institutions abroad to a degree that Yiddish cannot even approach.²⁹

This apparently renders modern literary creation in Yiddish into an immigrant literature with no definite geographic attachment. But this is not wholly true. Modern Yiddish literature is still clearly related to those places in which new Yiddish literature grew – Eastern Europe, or those areas in Eastern Europe where millions of Yiddish-speakers lived before the Holocaust; yet this affiliation has now taken on a temporal dimension. On various levels of its linguistic tools, topics and messages, there is an affiliation between modern Yiddish literature and pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe. Covert

or overt longing for the lost "old home" of Eastern European Jewry, now dispersed around the world and gradually losing its unique character, is one of the main characteristics of modern Yiddish literature, even of those who were not born in Eastern Europe or even visited it. This fact was very suitable to the anti-Zionist ideological aims of Soviet propaganda (in its milder forms) regarding the Jews. Setting Yiddish against Hebrew as having a non-Zionist non-Israeli ethnic characteristic seemed a logical step when it became apparent that it was impossible to wipe out Jewish nationality in the Soviet Union, and that it must be granted an expression not connected, and maybe even opposed to Zionism or Israel.

This phenomenon of renewed interest in the Yiddish language and culture among the new generation existed also in the West;³⁰ but as mentioned above, Soviet-born authors made up half of the more than 60 Yiddish writers born after the Holocaust, and their contribution to general Yiddish literature became paramount. Among the active writers were Alexander Beiderman, poet (born in Odessa in 1949); Alexander Beluosov, poet (born in Quibishev to a Russian family in 1948); Zisi Weitzman, poet (born in Yedinetz, Moldau in 1947); Felix Khaymovich, bi-lingual (Belorussian-Yiddish) poet (born in Minsk in 1948); Velvl Chernin, poet (born in Moscow in 1958); Moishe Lemster, poet (born in Belz, Moldau in 1951); Boris Sandler, prose writer (born in Belz, Moldau in 1950); Gennady Estraikh, prose writer (born in Zaporozhie in 1953); Michael Felzenbaum, poet, prose writer and playwright (born in Vasilkov, Ukraine in 1952); Michael Krutikov, literary critic (born in Moscow in 1957). One may also add the bi-lingual Russian-Yiddish poet Lev Barinsky (born just before the Holocaust in 1939, in Kishinev); all of these were writers for the *Sovietish Heimland* during the 1980s (Beluosov and Weitzman even before that).

Thus it was that toward the end of the 1980s, when new Jewish cultural initiatives started to surface, an open conflict broke out between the two versions of renewed Jewish identity: the "Zionist" identity oriented toward the Hebrew language, at least on the symbolic level, and the "loyalist" one oriented toward Yiddish, also on the symbolic level. The Yiddishist stream had on its side some activists of the middle and even the younger generation, along with the older one.

Yet, even at this early stage of the post-Soviet development of East European Jewry, there appeared signs of what may be termed Zionist Yiddishism, characterized by the integration of a Zionist political orientation and a Yiddishist (or partly Yiddishist) East European cultural orientation. Such integration had existed in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s. The outstanding Zionist Yiddishist at the time was the poet Joseph Kerler,³¹ but with the immigration to Israel of this group of tens of Soviet Yiddish writers and cultural leaders³² with Kerler at their head, this middle way practically ceased to exist. There were no direct ties between this group and their followers who started to act in the 1980s. Dmitry Yakirevich, one of the foremost activists of the Purim-schpiels in Moscow,³³ was the first to try to consciously define the ideology of Zionist Yiddishism in the early 1980s. He wrote the poem "*Far drei tausend knappe yahren*" [for about three thousand years] that became a sort of visiting card of the renewed Purim-schpiels in Moscow. Yakirevich was connected with the Historic-Ethnographic Society, all of whose members leaned ideologically toward Zionist Yiddishism, although not all of them were active Zionists or active Yiddishists.

At the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, there were several cultural initiatives related to what may be termed Zionist Yiddishism, among them the establishment of two small groups of philo-Yiddishists with a Zionist orientation.

The first, Yiddish Farein, was part of the Association for Jewish Culture, and headed by this author. In 1988-1989, the group published four issues (each in 100 copies) of its publication *Mame-Loshn*,³⁴ in which the traditional spelling of words of Hebrew-Aramaic origin, abolished in Soviet Russia at the end of the 1920s, was renewed. *Mame-Loshn* also printed material about cultural activity in Yiddish in Israel.

A small amount of material was also published in 1988-1990, in *Shalom*, an organ of the Association for Jewish Culture,³⁵ in which the author was a member. In 1989, the Yiddish Farein cooperated with Bar-Ilan University in organizing a Yiddish course in Moscow. Dmitry (Mordecai) Yoshkovsky was responsible on behalf of the Yiddish Farein. The Chairman of the Australian Jewish Congress Isi Leibler, himself a Yiddish-speaker, arrived in Moscow in 1989 for the opening of the Shlomo Michaels Center at the Jewish musical chamber theater,³⁶ headed at the time by Michael Gluz. Leibler helped the Farein to receive textbooks, books and journals in Yiddish from Australia, the U.S. and Israel. In 1990, a Yiddish textbook was published in 500 copies, prepared by the Yiddish Farein member Boris (Baruch) Kimelfeld.³⁷ At one stage, the Yiddish Farein began close cooperation with the Jewish youth movement in Moscow (The Moscow Center for the Learning and Dissemination of Jewish Culture), Techiah, headed by Leonid Roitman. After the author's immigration to Israel in 1990, Boris Kimelfeld led the activities of the Yiddish Farein.

The second, Lerer Farein, was a branch of the older Zionist organization Iggud Ha-morim (the Teachers' Organization), which began operating in mid-1989. Lerer Farein organized study circles for Yiddish (under Raphael Zaizev), based on the existing infrastructure of the teachers' union, and published information about the study of Yiddish when the editor of the paper was Shlomo Groman, a Yiddish activist who had formerly published poetry in *Sovietish Heimland* and *Birobidjaner Shtern*.

The founding of two separate small Yiddishist-Zionist organizations, both based in Moscow, had nothing to do with ideological differences between them (in the early 1990s most of their members came to Israel and identified with the right), but mainly with the conflict at the time between the Jewish Cultural Association headed by Michail Chlenov and the Zionist Organization headed by Arie Gorodetzky, the founder and leader of the Teachers' Union. Gorodetzky and his people assumed an outspoken and aggressive Zionist position, when Chlenov and his followers tried to place the main emphasis not on Zionism but on the revival of Jewish culture and organized Jewish life in the Soviet Union, in order to reach cooperation with the authorities in the new reality. One may add that within a few years, most of the active *halutzim* in both the Zionist Organization and the Association for Jewish Culture (including active members of the Yiddish Farein and Lerer Farein) went to Israel, while the two leaders, Gorodetzky and Chlenov, remained in Moscow.

The Zionist Yiddishist ideology was evident also in *VEK* (the acronym for *Herald of Jewish Culture*), that was published in Riga and became the first Jewish journal with a wide circulation in the post-Soviet era. This ideology was expressed in the poetry section, whose editor was Valery Slutsky, a well-known translator of Yiddish poetry. This section published, among others, translations of Uri Zvi Greenberg, David Hofstein, Peretz Markish, Shmuel Halkin, and Asher Schwartzman. It was typical for this section that the collection of Soviet Yiddish poems by the classic Peretz Markish (executed in 1952) opened with the poems "Galilee" and "Jerusalem," both written in Palestine in the 1920s.³⁸ Slutsky had formerly worked for *Sovietish Heimland* as a literary critic.³⁹ Among the writers in *VEK* were two other former writers of *Sovietish Heimland*—

Michael Krutikov (who wrote background material about the translated poets) and this writer.

A Russian translation of the Zionist pamphlet by Sholom Aleichem, "Why do the Jews Need a Land?"⁴⁰ was also published in *VEK*. It was a call for the solution of the Jewish problem in the old homeland and nowhere else. This article, not published during the Soviet era for obvious reasons, was purposely chosen by the editors in order to demonstrate to the Jewish public that Sholom Aleichem, who had been represented during Soviet times as the ultimate symbol of Yiddishist Jewish culture, was a supporter of Zionism. It is also typical that this article by Sholom Aleichem was placed directly after the summation document of the All-Soviet Congress on "Problems of Judaism in the Soviet Union," held in Riga in 1989.⁴¹

The play *The Aliyah of Benjamin the Third to the Holy Land*, after the classical *Travels of Benjamin the Third* by Mendele Moicher Sforim, also turned into an important cultural event with Yiddishist-Zionist characteristics. The play was presented by the Russian theater, Ermitage, in Moscow in 1988, but many Jewish cultural activists (including the author), who all later came to Israel, were involved in its preparation, and part of the texts (mainly songs) were done in Yiddish. The emphases in the show were different from those of Mendele's, defining here the aim of the journey (The Holy Land). Benjamin's call in the play, "We have to get out of these places as soon as possible!" became a call for immediate *aliyah*. The spirit behind the show was a young composer from Talinn, Avi Nadjievsky (today, Avi Benjamin, the composer for Gesher Theater in Tel Aviv), who was versed in Yiddish from home. The show was very popular among Jewish audiences, and diplomatic envoys from Israel were present at the opening.

Zionist motives were evident from the mid-1980s even in works published in Yiddish in the *Sovietish Heimland* and *Birobidjaner Shtern*, but only in the poetry (e.g., the poem "Der Seypher" by the young poet Isroel Gorelik of Bobruysk, Belorussia (born in 1966).⁴² The Yiddish literature mostly remained in the old framework, refraining from descriptions of the Palestinian history of the Jewish people,⁴³ or from any show of affection to the modern State of Israel.

It is important to note that the term "Zionist Yiddishism" is a bit artificial in the context of Soviet Jewry in the last decades of Communist rule. This is because groups and individuals who identified themselves and acted as Yiddishists and Zionists at this time and place, did not have a clear and orderly ideology about integration between Zionism and Yiddishism. In this respect, post-Soviet Zionist Yiddishism is substantially different from the Zionist-Yiddishist groups and movements active in Europe and Israel in the first half of the twentieth century, and whose vestiges continue to exist in Israel to this day.

An example of a Zionist-Yiddishist movement with a clear ideology was "Left Poalei-Zion,"⁴⁴ who wished to retain the Yiddish language and culture in independent Israel, and to grant Yiddish the status of one of its official languages. The foundation of Zionist-Yiddishist ideology of Left Poalei-Zion was laid by one of its founders, Ber Borokhov, who was also a Yiddish language scholar.⁴⁵ In spite of the clear defeat of Zionist Yiddishism in its struggle against anti-Yiddishist streams in Zionism, it has not fully disappeared from the scene. Beit Rishonei Poalei-Zion is still one of the important strongholds of Israeli Yiddishism.

Zionist-Yiddishist activists from the Soviet Union, before and after their *aliyah*, cooperated with Israeli Yiddishists, both Zionists and Bundists (as there are vestiges of the non-Zionist Bund in Israel), but this cooperation was on the practical and not on the ideological level – the Yiddishists in the post-Soviet areas needed logistic help, and the Israeli Yiddishists needed reinforcement of their diminishing forces. The essential differences between the two groups lay not in their approach to Yiddish and to Zionism, but in additional elements of their outlook. Thus, for example, the old Israeli Yiddishism was usually connected with the Socialist left and sometimes even the extreme left, whereas most Yiddishists coming from post-Soviet areas, mostly the younger ones, leaned toward the right or even the extreme right. (A sizeable number of former Yiddish Farein and Lerer Farein members reside in the settlements).

In spite of the above, it should be noted that what may be called Zionist-Yiddishist activity remained marginal in the cultural Yiddishist discourse in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, although it was sometimes provocative and full of the new Yiddishist initiatives of those years. Efforts were also made to revive Jewish cultural life in the traditional Soviet manner, on the basis of Yiddish (at least symbolically) and without Zionism, and often with the use of anti-Zionist propaganda in a vain effort to block the growing wave of *aliyah*.

The older Yiddish writers mostly stayed within the traditional Yiddishist framework even when they became prominent figures in societies for Yiddish culture that arose in several cities of the USSR (Hershl Polianker in Kiev, Aleksander Lisen in Lov, Yechiel Schraibman in Kishinev, Joseph Burg in Czernovitz, and others). Most of them had made their choice already at the beginning of the 1970s, when Kerler and his associates immigrated to Israel. Only Shira Gershman made the choice for *aliyah*. She had already come to Palestine from Lithuania in the 1920s, was a member of Kibbutz Ramat Rachel, and returned to the Soviet Union with the famous G'dud Ha'Avodah.⁴⁶ This does not mean that the rest were necessarily engaged in anti-Zionist activities under the new circumstances; they tried to work for the revival of Jewish cultural life in their own towns. Yet some of them faced a serious problem. Yiddish literature had stopped being part of the establishment already at the beginning of the 1990s, and government support for them ceased. We may quote here again Gennady Estreikh's article stating that the editorial board of the *Sovietish Heimland* "played a political role that no other Yiddish journal or newspaper could ever play. This proximity to higher echelons carried privileges for the editors and writers. For example, the journal paid high royalties so that, by Soviet standards, the writers were quite well off."⁴⁷ All of this has now come to an end.

The new Jewish organizations had an establishment of their own, and Yiddish writers of the older generation found it difficult to adjust to the new circumstances and become part of this establishment. But this was mostly in the periphery. In Moscow, where the office of the *Sovietish Heimland* was situated, many of the older Yiddish writers did not even try to join the new Jewish bodies. Aaron Vergelis tried to carry on business as usual, making some adjustments to the new situation in which the younger writers had a significant role. This author worked for the *Sovietish Heimland* from 1983 to 1987, and served as a link between the editorial board and informal and even Zionist bodies. Already in 1982, he initiated contact between the editorial board and the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society, expressed in the appearance of the section "Jewish Ethnography." This section was closed after a few issues due to governmental pressure. In 1986 this writer initiated the "Youth Issue," in which representatives of informal and Zionist Jewish circles also took part.

There was much tension between the anti-Zionist tendency of the *Sovietish Heimland* and the author's efforts to change

this course, and at the end of 1987 he resigned. At that time, the prose writer Boris Sandler of Kishinev joined the editorial board. Later, Gennady Estraiikh became editor-in-chief of the journal. Both these representatives of the younger generation played a major role in Vergelis's efforts to maintain the *Sovietish Heimland* in the post-Soviet era. It is typical that both of them belonged to those few Yiddish writers of the younger generation in whose writing were clear anti-Zionist motives.⁴⁸

Five major changes occurred in the *Sovietish Heimland* in its last years (1989-1991), reflecting the spirit of the times:

1. The appearance of several issues of a bi-lingual (Yiddish-Russian) supplement directed toward youth: *Yungvald*,⁴⁹ prepared mainly by Michael Krutikov and Gennady Estraiikh. The last defined it as "an educational Yiddishist journal with no clear political affiliation."⁵⁰
2. Material in Russian grew to occupy up to one quarter of the space in *Sovietish Heimland*, not necessarily translations of material published in Yiddish in that issue. A special editor was appointed for the Russian section.⁵¹
3. The attitude toward the State of Israel and the historical past of the Jewish people in Palestine changed for the better.
4. A short Yiddish-Russian dictionary was published as a supplement to *Sovietish Heimland*.⁵²
5. During the years 1989-1991, the second group of ten students was studying Yiddish at the Maxim Gorki Literary Institute, five of them sent from Birobidjan. The outstanding students of "Yiddish 2" were Michael Krutikov from Moscow and Moishe Lemster from Kishinev. This group was also formed at the initiative of Aaron Vergelis and under the auspices of *Sovietish Heimland*.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union brought about the collapse of *Sovietish Heimland* as an institution. The publishing house "*Sovietski Pisatel*" stopped printing books in Yiddish. It all happened suddenly. One of the last projects of "*Sovietski Pisatel*" in Yiddish was an anthology of young Yiddish writers, *In Onheib Weg* (At the Beginning of the Road), but this project was not completed, and the manuscript of the anthology was lost in the mayhem of *perestroika*.⁵³

Sovietish Heimland itself lost its governmental funding, and not one issue was published in 1992. When it started appearing again under the title *Die Yidische Gas* (The Jewish Street), it was dependent from day to day on mobilizing funds from various irregular sources. Most of the younger Yiddish writers left the country during 1990-1992, among them Leonid Shkolnik. Some of the older writers also came to Israel. The deputy editor of *Sovietish Heimland*, the poet Chaim Beider, emigrated to the U.S. The remaining older authors, among them Aaron Vergelis, could not continue publishing their journal, for reasons of age and lack of funding.

The newspaper *Birobidjaner Shtern* continued to appear, as it was supported by the local Birobidjan government, which was interested in it as a symbol of the Jewish nationalism of the autonomous Jewish district. But Yiddish slowly stopped being the only language of the paper, and Russian material occupied most of its space. Its level also deteriorated content-wise due to the *aliyah* of Shkolnik. The only interesting piece from the point of view of identity that appeared in the *Birobidjaner Shtern* was the novel *The Kuzari* by Roman Shoichet. This novel is devoted to the legendary Kuzari prince Bolen, who converted to Judaism and founded the Kuzari Kingdom as a Jewish state (at least religiously). The author identifies with the Kuzaris, and this may be interpreted as a challenge to Russian nationalism. However, the fact that the Kuzari kingdom existed in an area later to become part of the Soviet Union, gave some legitimacy to a local Jewish nationalism – Russian or Soviet – with apparent deep roots in Russian soil and without the need to search for deep national roots in Israel. The novel was written during the 1980s, "for the drawer," (with no expectation for publication) as the Russian saying went, and was apparently originally written in Russian. Roman Shoichet himself translated a part of it into Yiddish and published it in the *Birobidjaner Shtern*, for the possible reason that there was no other way to publish this work.⁵⁴

Two facts must be added to the reasons for the demise of the *Sovietish Heimland* and the loss of the weak hold of the *Birobidjaner Shtern* on readers outside the autonomous region. A great part of the readers and subscribers of the *Sovietish Heimland* and the *Birobidjaner Shtern* had emigrated to Israel or other countries during the first half of the 1990s. In addition, those remaining had available to them Yiddish publications (newspapers, journals and books) published in Israel and the U.S. and this ended the monopoly of Vergelis and his people on the written word in Yiddish (which had previously been undermined by the *Birobidjaner Shtern* under Leonid Shkolnik).

Since the mid-1990s it is impossible to speak of Yiddish literature in the former USSR as one unit. There were several different disconnected local initiatives, but the Soviet literary center had been wiped out. However, Yiddish and its culture still play some role in Jewish life in the former USSR. During the decade since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the number of Yiddish readers has become insignificant.⁵⁵ Efforts to include Yiddish teaching in kindergartens and schools have not added real Yiddish speakers, and barely managed to impart the basics of the language. Within a few years, Yiddish lost to Hebrew as the Jewish language. Hebrew has on its side the State of Israel with all of its active envoys to the former USSR, the Jewish Agency, and the return to religion whose language is Hebrew. Hebrew has a practical value, as it enables one to integrate in Israel. Yiddish has, on its side, only nostalgia, a search for local Jewish identity, and academic study. The numbers of Hebrew and Yiddish students in Jewish schools in the former USSR speak for themselves. On the level of single districts, we can identify some local patterns.

Moscow

For many decades, the capital had been the center of Yiddish culture in the USSR. Until recently there were still some active Yiddish writers of the older generation who, under the leadership of Vergelis, tried to maintain the dying journal *Die Yidische Gas*, the successor of *Sovietish Heimland*. However, nothing helped, not even Vergelis's attempt at one point to join Tankred Golenpolski, editor of the *Mezhdunarodnaya Yevreyskaya Gazeta*. The dream of the survival of *Sovietish Heimland* died in 1997, together with Aaron Vergelis.⁵⁶ With him died the pretense of post-Soviet Yiddish unison in the whole of the former USSR. It is noteworthy that in all five issues of *Die Yidische Gas* that appeared between 1993 and 1996, Vergelis made sure to mention that the editorial board included Yiddish writers from different countries of the former USSR: David Bromberg, Teviah Gen, Shmuel Gordon, Boris Mogilner (Russia); Moishe Lemster, Yechiel Shraibman (Moldovia); Hershl Polianker (Ukraine); Hirsh Reles (Belarus). This was a novelty, compared to the

former *Sovietish Heimland*.

Two theaters, founded as Yiddish theaters – the Jewish Musical Chamber Theater and Theater Shalom – function in Moscow to this day. These institutions have managed to join the new Jewish establishment. However, they are no longer Yiddish theaters in the traditional sense. There is no new Yiddish playwriting, and no possibility to enact serious plays from the classical repertory, no actors well versed in Yiddish.

Yiddish has not found its place in Jewish schools in Moscow. However, it is being studied rather seriously in several Jewish institutions of higher education, primarily in the Rambam Academy headed by Michael Chlenov, one of the founders of the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society and the Association for Jewish Culture. The head of the Jewish studies department at the RGGU is Professor David Fishman, a US citizen and one of the outstanding Yiddish scholars of our time.

Birobidjan

In the autonomous region of Birobidjan, Yiddish has retained its formal status as a semi-official local language. It is taught in local Jewish schools and at the Pedagogical Institute of Birobidjan. Special textbooks have been prepared for this purpose,⁵⁷ and some youth, not all of them Jewish, were sent to study Yiddish language and literature outside the Region – to Moscow, New York, and Jerusalem.

Some of the local radio and TV broadcasts are in Yiddish. The newspaper *Birobidjaner Shtern* continues to appear, although lately most of the text is in Russian, and only two Yiddish pages have remained. Street signs in Birobidjan are still partly written in Yiddish, next to Russian.

The role of Yiddish in Birobidjan is mostly symbolic. A significant fact is that in 1991 a weekly business section was added to the *Birobidjaner Shtern*, entitled "Die Woch." Only its title was in Yiddish, and even that in Cyrillic script.⁵⁸ Mass emigration and the dying out of the older generations have diminished still further the natural use of this language in Birobidjan, despite the well-felt national awakening. The reason is, among others, the infiltration of Hebrew into Jewish education in Birobidjan, where it had no foothold formerly (like the underground *ulpanim* in several cities at the end of the Soviet era).

Baltic States and Moldova

The percentage of Yiddish speakers in the Baltic states and Moldova was relatively high. The spoken language was understood not only by older people but by the middle and some of the younger generation as well. The Societies for Jewish Culture that arose in these countries at the beginning of *perestroika* caused Yiddish not only on the symbolic level, but in advertisements, meetings, and cultural events. Yiddish teaching was established in schools.⁵⁹ At the beginning of the 1990s, community papers were published in Yiddish in Lithuania and Moldova (e.g., "Yerusho-laim Delita," "Undzer Kol"). The writers Yechiel Screibman, Boris Sandler and Moishe Lemster contributed greatly to Yiddish activities in Moldova. However, after the mass emigration, Yiddishist activity has been fading out in all of these countries.

Yet there is still some activity, and in Lithuania it has even gained world standing due to the program for Yiddish teaching at the University of Vilnius, headed by the renowned Yiddish linguist Hirshe-Dovid Katz, U.S.-born and former lecturer at Oxford University. This program draws students from outside the borders of the former Soviet Union because of Professor Katz's personality and the symbolic significance to non-Zionist Yiddishists in the West of Vilnius as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" (even some Israelis join in the Yiddishist activities in Vilnius). This is the town in which the famous YIVO Institute was established – the flagship of Yiddishism, now situated in New York. These ideological trends were in accord with the line led by Emmanuel Zingeris, one of the present-day Jewish leaders, formerly connected with the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society and among the young writers of *Sovietish Heimland*. Yet he has always advocated "Litvak patriotism" and a separate Litvak identity. It is typical that already at the end of the 1980s, Emmanuel Zingeris answered my question about his aspirations and the reason for his not wishing to come to Israel: "I want to erect a monument on the grave of Lithuanian Jewry."

Ukraine

Yiddishist activity in this state, similar to the Baltic states and Moldova in the percentage of Yiddish speakers, mostly in its western areas, was supported not only by Jewish organizations with a Yiddishist non-Zionist ideology, but also by the government. Apart from mostly unsuccessful attempts to establish Yiddish teaching in the schools, and the practical use of Yiddish in the work of some of the cultural societies at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s (e.g. in Czernovitz and Odessa), books and periodicals printed in Yiddish were funded (at least partly) by the authorities. In addition to some books by local Yiddish authors, two publications should be noted:

- a. The Yiddish-Ukrainian Dictionary by Yosip Torchinsky,⁶⁰ published in 1960 by the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.
- b. The bilingual (Yiddish-Russian) journal that began to appear in the mid-1990s in Odessa,⁶¹ published by the local Society for Jewish Culture.

In the Yiddish publications printed in Ukraine (as different from Lithuania, for example), Soviet orthography was almost always followed (in the *Sovietish Heimland* version, with final letters).

A serious attempt was recently made to establish Yiddish teaching in the University of Donetsk. In the past several years, the International Committee for Yiddish and its Culture, situated in Tel Aviv, has been organizing summer courses for the study of Yiddish, with the aid of Israeli teachers.

There still exists a Yiddish theater in Kiev, established at the end of the 1980s, but after the *aliyah* of most of its actors at the beginning of the 1990s it has stopped being a truly Yiddish theater (similar to the Jewish theaters in Moscow).

Provincial Russian Towns

There is no real use of Yiddish here, only some token signs, such as the name of a local Jewish cultural society or the title of its publication, or an attempt to organize a circle of Yiddish lovers. This depends on the existence of local activists (or even one such) who are versed in Yiddish and consider it valuable. To this type belong also the big cities in Central Asia and Trans-Caucasus, in which large Ashkenazi communities still exist (e.g., Tashkent).

White Russia

It is difficult to assess the status of Yiddish here, for lack of information. The percentage of Yiddish speakers among White Russian Jews on the eve of the mass emigration was higher than that in Russia itself and similar to that in Ukraine, but the political situation here is different. There are at present no local Yiddish publications, and the one significant Yiddish poet, Felix Khaymovich (also writes in Belorussian) is not active in the work of Jewish bodies. He lately writes in Yiddish only rarely, and publishes these poems outside Belarus. His Yiddish poem "By the Monument" may be considered an attempt to define local Jewish identity. The poet, born after the Holocaust, describes his feeling toward the famous "Yama" in Minsk, the communal grave of Holocaust victims in the capital of Belarus. The poem begins with the line "Here is my Western Wall," and ends with the proclamation, "Here in this soil is buried my great-grandfather / Here in this soil is buried my grandfather / Here in this soil is buried my father / and here is my Jerusalem!"⁶² In the poem "Coward," written in the mid-1990s in Belorussia but published in Israel, Khaymovich speaks of his feeling for Yiddish in the past: "At first I was afraid of the Yiddish language: / Kosmopolits spoke it...and the constant words 'I will be thrown in prison' / followed me even in my dreams / Lately somehow, unknowingly / these words were silenced. I suddenly / fell in love with that day – and was frightened. / I am a coward."⁶³

During the 1990s, most of the Yiddish writers and activists of all generations came to Israel. Today, more than half of the members of the Society of Yiddish Authors and Journalists are immigrants from the former USSR. Some emigrated to the U.S.A. The new generation that entered Soviet Yiddish literature during the 1980s and early 1990s, is now mostly outside the former USSR. They joined Yiddishist activity in Israel and Western countries, some of them in leading roles. Beyond literary writing in Yiddish dominated by ex-Soviet Jews (some Yiddishist projects in Israel, such as the Tel Aviv periodical *Naye Vegen*, are based mainly on them), the following facts may be mentioned: The editor of the leading Yiddish weekly *Forverts* published in New York is Boris Sandler, who came to Israel from Moldova at the beginning of the 1990s, was deputy president of the Society of Yiddish Authors and Journalists in Israel, and then emigrated to the United States. The editor of the Russian edition of *Forverts* is Leonid Shkolnik, former editor of *Birobidjaner Shtern*. He also came to Israel in the early 1990s and edited the section "Stetl" in the Tel Aviv Russian newspaper *Novosty*, and then emigrated to the U.S. The Yiddish language program at Oxford University is run by two immigrants from the USSR – Gennady Estraiikh and Michael Krutikov. Two of the four lecturers in Yiddish literature at the Center for Yiddish at Bar-Ilan University are immigrants from the former USSR – this author and Boris Kotlerman, formerly a journalist on the staff of the *Birobidjaner Shtern*. Until recently, the chairman of the Society of Yiddish Authors and Journalists in Israel was Lev Barinski and the director of Beit Rishonei Poalei Zion was Michael Felsenbaum.

A positive approach toward Yiddish and its culture is typical for immigrants from the former USSR in general. Not accidentally does the newcomers' network devote special programs to Yiddish culture, and all leading Russian-language periodicals in Israel carry sections devoted to Yiddish and its culture. This author initiated the establishment of the weekly supplement *Yevreiski Komerton* in the paper *Novosty*, and edited it for several years. This supplement was clearly Zionist-Yiddishist, and was quite successful among its readers. The newspaper *Vestistill* successfully carries a Yiddish section edited by Shlomo Groman, a former activist of the Yiddish Farein. Zionist Yiddishism has found its place as one of the ideological components in the identity of immigrants from the former USSR, and enables them to base their process of integration into the culture and identity with this country on some form of Jewish cultural continuity, and not only on the adoption of Israeli models of Jewish culture, or on an adherence to the foreign Russian culture. Soviet immigrants have shown some interest in the ideas of the old-time immigrant from Argentina and Yiddish activist Daniel Galai about fostering a separate Ashkenazi identity in Israel, an important component of which is the Yiddish language. The organization Dor Hemshekh – Yiddish Lovers, headed by Galai, boasts of many immigrants from the former USSR. He himself has joined the Israel B'aliya party, which represents mostly immigrants from the former USSR.

In addition, spoken Yiddish has become an important tool of communication for older immigrants unable to master the Hebrew language – even those not fully versed in Yiddish.

We may expect in the foreseeable future that Yiddish will disappear in the former Soviet Union as a spoken language, with the demise of its last natural speakers. However, if organized Jewish communities are to survive in the post-Soviet area, they will need a symbol of Jewish identity that is not overtly Zionist or religious, but rather local. Yiddish, with its culture and literature, can serve as one of the deep-rooted Jewish elements in Eastern Europe. The language may be preserved artificially by teaching it in educational institutions and special courses. In this case, it may be possible for it also to serve the theater in the former USSR, and even original Yiddish literature, as is beginning to happen in Western countries.

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Notes

1. The first renovated Yiddish Culture Institution was the Vilnius Amateur Theater Group established in 1956, following

the Twentieth Communist Party Congress. See Velvl Chernin, "Institutionalized Jewish Culture from the 1960s to the mid-1980s," in Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*. (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 229.

2. See Vladimir Karasik, *Jewish Press in Russian. Russia 1986-1992. Bibliographic Register* (Moscow: RAU-Press, 1992), p. 105.

3. See, for example, documents from Soviet Party and KGB Archives, published in Boris Morozov, *Yevreyskaya emigratsia v sovete novykh dokumentov* [Jewish Emigration in the Light of New Documents] (Tel Aviv: Cummings Centre, Tel-Aviv University, 1999), pp. 85, 90-91, 117-119, 119-120, 166, 183-188.

4. Leonid Shkolnik, born in Kemerovo, Siberia in 1946, came to Birobidjan as a child, and was a poet in Russian. He translated local Yiddish poetry into Russian, and wrote Yiddish poems. At the end of the 1980s, he became a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from the Jewish Autonomous Region. He participated in the First Congress of the Jewish Va'ad in Moscow (Dec. 1989). Shkolnik was the editor of the only issue of the magazine *Adar* (in Russian) of the Friendship and Cultural Contacts with Israel Society in Birobidjan, March 1990. See Karasik, *Jewish Press in Russian*, p. 147. After his *aliya* to Israel in 1991, Shkolnik worked in the Israeli Russian-language press. In 1999, he moved to New York, and is now the editor of the Russian version of the Yiddish weekly *Forverts*.

5. Grigory Kanovich was born in 1929 in Kaunas, Lithuania. His novels on Jewish topics were translated into different European languages and into Hebrew. At the end of the 1980s, he became a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from Lithuania ("Sajudis"). He participated in the First Congress of the Jewish Va'ad in Moscow (Dec. 1989). In 1990, he published a literary Zionist pamphlet, "Yevreyskaya romashka" (The Jewish Camomile) (*VEK*, No. 2(5), Riga, pp. 1-3), which had significant influence. Kanovich emigrated to Israel in 1992, and lives in Bat-Yam.

6. L. Koval, "Tsvey trefungen mit Grigory Kanovichn" [Two meetings with Grigory Kanovich], *Birobidjaner Shtern*, 27 April 1986.

7. The famous Russian literary critic Lev Aninsky wrote in his Preface to the Russian edition of *Novels* by the Lithuanian-Jewish writer Ichokas Meras (in Israel from 1972) about the brave national Jewish position of his works: "He broke through the Lithuanian 'front.' The writers of the national republics had a bit more leeway than the Russian writers. First, as a Lithuanian Meras had 'by definition' more of a right to express a national awareness (not necessarily Jewish). Second, as a Jew he found himself in Lithuania (as in the Baltic states in general) in a dangerous position, along with Russians, Poles and other non-Lithuanians. During the Hitlerist occupation they were all targets for German and even Lithuanian guns." (Lev Aninsky, "Mir derzhitsia?" [Does the World Stand?] in Ichokas Meras, *Na chom derzhitsia mir. Romany* [On What the World Stands. Novels] (Moscow-Tel-Aviv, 1994), pp. 3-4. This explanation was, in this writer's opinion, relevant in Kanovich's case also.

8. Moyshe Belenky, "Dervakhung (onshtot a retsenzie)" [Awakening (In Lieu of a Review)] *Folks-sztime*, 30 November 1985; Berl Royzen, "Naye kinstlerishe dergreykhungen fun der rusish-yidisher literatur" [New Creative Achievements of the Russian-Jewish Literature]. *Folks-sztime*, 12 November 1983; Berl Royzen, "A bukh vos regt dem gedank" [A book that Awakens Thought]. *Folks-sztime*, 8 March 1986.

9. Velvl Chernin, "Ven der bukh iz durkhgeleyt" [When the Book is Read]. *Birobidjaner Shtern*, 29 September 1985.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Eliohu Shulman, "Velvl Chernin – a yunger yidisher shrayber in Rusland" [Velvl Chernin – A Young Yiddish Writer in Russia]. *Der Veker*, July-August-September 1986, pp. 11-12.

12. Chone Shmeruk, "Khatsi yovel le-*Sovietish Heimland*– hearot va-haarakhot" [Some Comments and Assessments on *Sovietish Heimland's* Twenty-Fifth Jubilee]. *Yehudey Brit Ha-moatsot*, 11, Jerusalem, 1988, pp. 72-73.

13. Leonid Shkolnik, "Signal iz Moskvyy" [A Signal from Moscow], *Vremia*, 31 July 1992, Tel-Aviv; Leonid Shkolnik, "Eti tovarishchi ne ponimayut..." [These Comrades Don't Understand...], *Novosti Nedeli*, 27 October 1995, Tel-Aviv.

14. About the Yiddish theaters in that period see Dmitry Yakirevich, "Yevreysky teatr v Sovetskom Soyuze (1956-1991) i postkommunisticheskoy Rossii" [Jewish Theatre in the Soviet Union (1956-1991) and Post-Communist Russia], in *The Shorter Jewish Encyclopaedia in Russian*, vol. 8 (Jerusalem: The Society for Research on Jewish Communities and the Hebrew University, 1996), pp. 811-823; Velvl Chernin, "Institutionalized Jewish Culture from the 1960s to the mid-1980s," pp. 228-233.

15. Velvl Chernin, "Dialogn vegn der yidisher kultur in FSSR" [Dialogs on Jewish Culture in the USSR], Appendix to *Sovietish Heimland*, 11, Moscow, 1996.

16. Beyder et al., *Alefbeys* (Khabarovsk: Kraievoye Izdatel'stvo, 1982).

17. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

18. Shapiro et al., *Rusish-yidisher verterbukh* (Moscow: Russkii Yazyk, 1976).

19. S. Rokhkind, H. Shkliar, *Yidish-rusisher verterbukh* [Yiddish-Russian Dictionary] (Minsk: Farlag fun der visnshaft-akademie fun der VSSR, 1940).

20. Eli Falkovich, "O yazyke yidish" [On the Yiddish Language], vol. I (Moscow: *Yazyki narodov SSSR*, 1966). This work was based on Eli Falkovich's classic book, *Yidish: Fonetik, Grafik, Leksik un Gramatik* [Yiddish: Phonetics, Graphics, Vocabulary and Grammar] (Moscow: Melukhe-farlag "Der Emes," 1940).

21. Rokhkind, Shkliar, *Rusish-yidisher verterbukh*, p. 7.

22. Gennady Estraiikh, "Di yunge yidische shrayber in di shkiye yorn fun Sovetnfarband" [Young Yiddish Writers in the Final Years of the Soviet Union]. *Di pen*, no. 16, Oxford, November 1995, p. 4.

23. Aaron Vergelis, "Nemt zikh on mit koykhes, yunge shprotlingen" [Collect your Forces, Young Sprouts], *Sovietish*

Heimland, no. 7, 1986, p. 7.

24. Mordechai Schaechter, "A vort frier" [Preface] in *Vidervuks: A nayer dor yidishe shraybers. Zamlbukh [Regrowth: A New Generation of Yiddish Writers. An Anthology]* (New York: Yugntruf, League for Yiddish, Congress for Jewish Culture, 1989), pp. 6-7.

25. Yosef Lipski, "Ha-yidish khaya u-margisha tov be-Moskva" [Yiddish is Alive and Well in Moscow], *Al Ha-mishmar*, 6 November 1986.

26. The Jewish Historical Ethnographical Commission was a non-formal scientific institution founded in 1990 by a group of Moscow Jewish intellectuals, with the aim to legalize Jewish studies in the Soviet Union. The leaders of the commission were Dr. Michael Chlenov and Dr. Igor Krupnik, both members of the staff of Miklikho-McLay Ethnography Research Institute of the Sciences Academy of the USSR. Among the active members of the commission were many Yiddish speakers: Abram Torpusman, Rashid Kaplanov, Velvl Chernin, Gennady Estraiikh, Dmitry Yakirevich, Shlomo Koliakov, Michael Krutikov and Lev Cherenkov. Some of them were or became Yiddish activists.

27. For more details on the modern young generation of Yiddish writers as a phenomenon see Velvl Chernin, "Der dor nokhn Khurbn" [The Post-Holocaust Generation], *Topfpunkt*, no. 3, Tel-Aviv, 2001, pp. 80-83.

28. On the role of Yiddish in the social history and culture of the Jewish autonomous region, see Boris Kotlerman, *Der status fun yidish in Birobidzhan [The Status of Yiddish in Birobidjan]*, Ph.D. dissertation, Rena Costa Yiddish Centre, Department for the Literature of the Jewish People, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan. 2001.

29. Vladimir Zeev Khanin, "Arum Yiddish. Etnisher identitet un shprakh-politik in nokh-sovetishn ukrainishn yidntum" [Around Yiddish. Ethnical Identification and the Linguistic Politics in Post-Soviet Ukrainian Jewry], *Der Taych*, no. 1, Bar-Ilan (in print).

30. See, for example Mordechai Schaechter, "A vort frier," pp. 5-9.

31. Joseph Kerler, a prominent Yiddish Soviet poet (born in 1918 in Haysin, Ukraine), who began his struggle for *aliyah* in 1965. He published poems in Israeli and American Yiddish periodicals and (in Russian translation) in Jewish *samizdat*. In 1970, Kerler published an open letter demanding that Soviet authorities open the gates for *aliyah*. He made *aliyah* in 1971. In the same year, his poetry book on the struggle for *aliyah*, "Gezang tsvishn tseyen" [Song between Teeth], was published in Tel-Aviv. He received the Itzik Manger Prize of the Israeli Yiddish Writers Union. In 1973, he founded a literary annual, *Yerusholaimer Almanakh*, and was its editor until his death in Jerusalem in 2000. During his Zionist activity in Moscow, he was under KGB observation. See, for example, a document from the KGB archives published in B. Morozov, *Yevreyskaya emigratsia* (Tel Aviv: Ivrus, 1998), pp. 53-54.

32. This group was the nucleus of authors of *Yerusholaimer Almanakh*. Among them were important Yiddish writers such as Hirsh Osherovich, Rachel Baumvol, Meir Kharats, Ziame Telesin, Meir Yelin, Chaim Maltinsky, Motl Saktsier, Eliezer Podriadchik, Eli Shekhtman. Another prominent Yiddish cultural figure who came to Israel from the USSR in those years was the singer Nechama Lifshitz. None of the Yiddish culture activists who left the Soviet Union in the 1970s went to a Western country; all of them made *aliyah*.

33. On the Moscow Purim-schpils and the role of Yiddish in them, see Roza Finkelberg, "Purimshpil in Moscow" [Purimshpil in Moscow], *Aktsent*, no. 2, 1993, Jerusalem, pp. 48-50; Dmitry Yakirevich, "Yevreysky teatr v Sovetskom Soyuze (1956-1991) i postkommunisticheskoy Rossii," [Jewish Theater in Post-Communist Russia], p. 823; V. Chernin, "Tarbut yehudit – milkhemet safot? Reayonot im Igor Gurvich, Dmitry Yakirevich ve-Roman Spektor" [Jewish Culture – a War of Languages? Interviews with Igor Gurvich, Dmitry Yakirevich and Roman Spektor], *Yehudey Brit Ha-moatsot*, 12, Jerusalem 1989, pp. 216-225; Velvl Chernin, "Markivey ha-zehut ha-leumit ba-sifrut ha-yehudit ha-sovietit mi-sof shnot ha-50 ve-ad le-tkhillat shnot ha-90" [Elements of Ethnic Identification in Jewish Soviet Literature from the End of the 1950s to the Beginning of the 1990s], Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Literature of the Jewish People, Section for Yiddish Literature, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, 1997, pp. 170-171.

34. See Estraiikh, "Di yunge yidishe shrayber," p. 8.

35. Karasik, *Jewish Press in Russian*, p. 117.

36. The Solomon Mykhoels Cultural Centre, *Real Hope or False Dawn for Soviet Jewry?* Moscow, February 1989. Printed in Australia.

37. Boris Kimelfeld, *Yevreysky (idish) yazyk: Nachalny kurs [Yiddish Language: A Course for Beginners]* (Kiev: Kiyevsky Pedagogichesky Institut im. M. Gorkogo, 1990).

38. *VEK*, no. 3(6), Riga, 1990, p.8.

39. Valery Slutsky, "S'iz neytik a sheferishe rehabilitatsie fun Dovid Hofshiteyn in rusish" [A Creative Rehabilitation of David Hofshiteyn is Needed in Russian]. *Sovietish Heimland*, no. 7, 1989, pp. 73-84. Valery Slutsky's translations, first published in *VEK*, were reprinted many times and recently published in book form: *Iz yevreyskoy poezii XX veka* [From Jewish Poetry of the XX Century], translated by Valery Slutsky, Jerusalem, 2001.

40. Sholom Aleichem, "Zachem yevreyam nuzhna strana?" [Why Do the Jews Need a Land?], *VEK*, no. 2, Riga, 1989, pp. 6-9.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-5.

42. Isroel Gorelik, "Der seyfer" [The Book], *Sovietish Heimland*, no. 7, 1987, p. 156. Gorelik made *aliyah* in 1990, and lives in Ofra. He writes for Israeli Yiddish periodicals, and was a member of the "Kach" movement.

43. Velvl Chernin, "Mered tokh kriat berekh: Hishtakfut ha-historia ha-leumit ba-siporet ha-sovietit be-yidish ba-shanim 1960-1990" [Resisting on One's Knees: National History as Reflected in Soviet Yiddish Prose (1960-1990)], *Chulyot: Journal of Yiddish Research*, no. 5 (Winter 1999):393-401.

44. On the national cultural concept of Poalei-Zion, see Ben-Adir, "Moderne gezelschaftlekhe un natsionale shtremungen" [Modern Social and National Trends], *Algemeine Entsiklopedie. Yidn.*, vol. 3 (New York: Dubnov-fond un CIKO, 1942), pp. 492-495.
45. On Ber Borokhov as a Zionist Yiddishist, see I.A.Yoffe, "Borokhov," *Algemeine Entsiklopedie*, vol. 5 (New York: Dubnov-fond un CIKO, 1944), pp. 205-209.
46. Shira Gorchman came to Israel in 1990 and published some memoir books on Palestine in the 1920s. She died in Ashdod in 2000.
47. Estraikh, "Di yunge yidishe shrayber," p. 3.
48. Chone Shmeruk, "*Khatsi yovel le-*" *Sovietish Heimland*, pp. 64-65.
49. Karasik, *Jewish Press in Russian*, p. 117.
50. Estraikh, "Di yunge yidishe shrayber," p. 7.
51. Karasik, *Jewish Press in Russian*, p. 105.
52. Estraikh, *Yidish-rusisher verterbukh*.
53. Estraikh, "Di yunge yidishe shrayber," p. 7.
54. Chernin, "Mered tokh kriet berekh," pp. 397-400.
55. 1989 All-Union Population Census (Moscow: Statistika, 1990).
56. The last issue of *Di yidishe gas* was no. 5, 1996.
57. For example, Liuba Futlik, *Leyenbukh far 2-4 klas* [Reading texts for 2nd-4th grades] (Riga: Zvaigzne, 1989).
58. Karasik, *Jewish Press in Russian*, p. 151.
59. Some books for Yiddish teaching were published in these countries. See Liuba Futlik, *Leyenbukh*.
60. Y. Torchinsky, *Kurtser yidish-ukrainisher verterbukh* [Short Yiddish-Ukrainian Dictionary] (Kiev: Holovna spetsializovana redaktsia literatury movamy natsionalnykh menshyn Ukrayiny, 1996).
61. The first issue of *Mame-Loshnof* of Odessa was published in 1994, with the participation of a young Yiddish activist, Mitl Tishchenko (now in Germany), who studied in Bar-Ilan University in Israel.
62. Felix Khaymovich, "Lem obelisk" [By the Monument], *Toplpunkt*, no. 3, Tel-Aviv, 2001, pp. 100-101.
63. Felix Khaymovich, "Bayazlivets" [Coward], *Yevreysky kamerton*, 22.11.96, Tel-Aviv, p. 8.

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About Velvl Chernin

Ethnographer, literary scholar and Yiddish poet Velvl Chernin was born in Moscow in 1958. In the 1980s, he was on the staff of *Sovetish heymland*—the only magazine published in Yiddish in the Soviet Union during that period.

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